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# Student choice in higher education: motivations for choosing to study at an international branch campus

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## Abstract

The international branch campus has emerged as a prominent feature on the international higher education landscape. Although there exists a fairly substantial body of literature that has sought to identify the motivations or choice criteria used by international students to select countries and institutions, there has to date been little research on student motivations for studying at an international branch campus. This quantitative study, using the push-pull model of international student destination choice as its theoretical framework, involved 320 undergraduate and postgraduate students studying at branch campuses in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It was found that the main motivations of students who choose to study at an international branch campus are different to those students who choose to study at home campuses. Thus, we propose a revised model of international student destination choice, which incorporates two distinct sets of push and pull factors – one that applies to the home campuses of Western universities and one that applies to international branch campuses. In addition to developing the theory on international student choice, our findings may be used by higher education institutions to better understand both their existing and potential students, with the view to applying segmentation techniques in their marketing activities.

**Keywords:** international branch campuses, student decision-making, student choice, push-pull model, United Arab Emirates (UAE)

## Introduction

Ever since the first universities were established several centuries ago, they attracted students from foreign countries. During the second half of the twentieth century, the forces of globalisation encouraged increased student mobility across national boundaries. Increasingly, universities in Western countries depend on enrolling international students for the revenues they bring and to meet internationalisation objectives (Wilkins and Huisman, 2011b). Also, the increase in transnational higher education (where learners are located in a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is based) has benefited both host countries (e.g. by promoting human development) and source countries (e.g. by providing institutions with a new source of income). Data collected by the OECD reveals that international student mobility increased considerably more over the last three decades than total international migration (King, Findlay & Ahrens, 2010); in fact, international student mobility grew by 52% over the period 1998-2004.

The main directional flows of students have been from east to west and south to north, and in 2004 the five countries hosting the largest numbers of international students were (in rank order) the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Germany, France and Australia (King, Findlay & Ahrens, 2010). In addition to the student flows just mentioned, over the last decade, students also began to move in new directions. In particular, students started

circulating east to east; in other words, students in Asian countries started choosing to study abroad in other Asian countries (Lasanowski, 2009). Newly recognised higher education hubs, such as Singapore and Malaysia, have been major beneficiaries of this new trend. Institutions located in the 'new' higher education hubs now actively market themselves to international students (Knight, 2011).

Western universities that rely on enrolling large numbers of international students have not yet suffered from the changing student flows; first, because the new east-to-east movements have not occurred at the expense of traditional flows (i.e., they represent new, additional demand), and second, because considerable proportions of higher education capacity at the new hubs is provided by international branch campuses, which are mostly owned by Western universities. The international branch campus is a relatively new variant of transnational higher education by which universities can offer their programmes worldwide without students having to leave their home country or region. In 2009, there were over 162 international branch campuses globally and, with over 40 institutions, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was the largest host country of international branch campuses globally (Becker, 2009). International branch campuses might be regarded as smaller versions of home campuses, where universities are based. However, the product offering abroad rarely comes close to the home product, in terms of breadth of curriculum, quality of academic staff, physical environment, learning resources and social facilities (Altbach, 2010).

Altbach (2004) argues that Western universities can be seen as neocolonists, seeking to dominate not for ideological or political reasons but rather for commercial gain. Higher education has become a commodity, and since commodified systems tend to be lean systems that emphasise cost minimisation, investment in libraries, learning resources and social facilities might fall below international norms (Naidoo, 2007). Some Western universities deliver standardised programmes worldwide, which can be irrelevant or inappropriate in local markets (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). Given the differences in product offering at home and branch campuses, it is interesting to discover why students choose to study at international branch campuses (e.g. in countries with less established reputations for higher education provision).

In several locations globally, the demand for higher education at international branch campuses is already large, and it is still fast-growing. For example, whilst Singapore expects branch campuses to provide much of the capacity to achieve its target of 150,000 international students by 2015 (Gribble & McBurnie, 2007), foreign universities in the Arab Gulf States already enrol over 30,000 students (Wilkins, 2011), and, by 2010, more international students from non-European Union countries were taking UK higher education programmes outside of the UK than in it (Universities UK, 2010).

There is a fairly substantial body of literature that has sought to identify the motivations or choice criteria used by international students to select countries and institutions (McMahon, 1992; Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Pimpa, 2005; Shanka, Quintal & Taylor, 2005; Gatfield & Chen, 2006; Li & Bray, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Chen, 2008; Bodycott, 2009; Abubakar, Shanka & Muuka, 2010; Padlee, Kamaruddin & Baharun, 2010; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011a).

The majority of empirical studies have been concerned with examining the movement of students to Western countries such as Australia, the UK and US. We were not able to find any research that specifically examined student motivations for studying at an international branch campus. By focusing on students who chose to study at an international branch campus this quantitative study fills a gap in the literature, which will enable development of student decision-making theory and provide much needed information for strategy and marketing decision-makers in higher education institutions. The research examines the

decision-making (in the UAE) of both undergraduate and postgraduate students and students of different nationality.

### **Literature on international student destination choice**

Some researchers have examined international student decision-making as a process, in which the student passes through certain stages (e.g. Jackson, 1982; Maringe & Carter, 2007). These stages typically include problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and evaluation of the purchase decision. Other researchers have concentrated on the factors that influence students' choices of country and/or institution (Table 1). McMahon (1992) conducted one of the earliest studies on the factors that influenced international student decision-making. She proposed two models to explain the flow of international students from 18 developing countries to the US during the 1960s and 1970s. The first model was concerned with 'push' factors from the source countries, which included the availability of higher education and each country's economic strength, while the second model focused on the economic, political and social 'pull' factors of the US as a destination for higher education study.

Virtually all of the research on international student motivations and decision criteria conducted since McMahon's study has also adopted the 'push-pull' framework. One of the most highly cited studies is Mazarrol and Soutar's (2002). They examined the motivations of 2,485 students who had gone from four different Asian countries to Australia in order to take a post-secondary programme. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) concluded that push factors operate within a source country to initiate the student's decision to study overseas, while the pull factors operate in the host country to attract students to that particular country over other countries.

The most common push factors mentioned in the literature are lack of capacity and opportunities in students' home countries, lower educational quality, employer preference for overseas education, the unavailability of particular subjects, and political and economic problems in the home countries. The pull factors most often mentioned in the literature include quality of education and reputation of country/institution, high rankings, improved employment prospects, opportunity to improve English language skills and opportunity to experience a different culture. Personal and human factors are also important in determining student choices, such as individual attitudes to religion and safety, as well as the influence of recommendations from family, friends, teachers and agents. Increasingly, students are influenced by social networking and consumer websites, such as RateMyProfessors.com (Wilkins & Epps, 2011).

Although the push-pull model has most often been applied to students choosing to study in Western countries such as Australia, the UK and US, studies examining flows to other countries, particularly in Asia, have emerged more recently (e.g. Li & Bray, 2007; Padlee, Kamaruddin & Baharun, 2010). We are not however aware of any study that has focused specifically on student motivations for choosing to study at an international branch campus located at one of the new higher education hubs, such as Malaysia, Qatar, Singapore or the UAE.

### **The push-pull model of international student choice**

The push-pull model was originally developed to explain the factors influencing the movement of people for migration (Lee, 1966) but it has since become the most common tool used by educational researchers to aid the examination and explanation of international student motivations and decisions. The model has been used to understand international student flows, the decision or motivation to study abroad and the international students' choices of country and institution (Chen, 2007a).

**Table 1.** Summary of empirical research on international student decision-making.

Reference	Host country(s)	Source country(s)	Factors influencing choice
McMahon (1992)	United States	Various	Economic and cultural links between source countries and host country; availability of scholarships; other assistance.
Joseph and Joseph (2000)	Various	Indonesia	Course and career information; necessary resources available; environment conducive to learning; reputable degree programme; clean and safe environment; costs.
Mazzarol and Soutar (2002)	Australia	China, India, Indonesia, Taiwan	Knowledge about host country; personal recommendations; safety; cost issues; social factors; reputation; quality of institution.
Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003)	United Kingdom	Various	Quality of education; qualifications gained recognised; easy admission; employment during and after study; cost issues; accommodation; safety; culture.
Pimpa (2005)	Australia	Thailand	University reputation; variety of courses offered; teaching quality; employment after study; good facilities at university for international students.
Shanka, Quintal and Taylor (2005)	Australia	Various	Proximity to home; quality and variety of education; cost of living; where friends study; family recommendation; safety.
Gatfield and Chen (2006)	Australia, United Kingdom, United States	Taiwan	Recommendations from family; friends and agents; employment prospects; quality and reputation of institutions; tuition fees and costs of living.
Li and Bray (2007)	Hong Kong, Macau	China	Academic ability; social and cultural experience; economic income; ability in employment market; quality of education; internationalisation factors.

Reference	Host country(s)	Source country(s)	Factors influencing choice
Maringe and Carter (2007)	United Kingdom	Africa	Recognition of gained qualification; easy admission; quality teaching and learning environment; employment during study.
Chen (2008)	Canada	(a) China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan (b) Various	Safe place; studious environment; multicultural environment; quality of life; future employment prospects; degree valued in home country; ease of visa process; quality and reputation of institution/programme.
Bodycott (2009)	Various	China	Employment after study; social and academic support; programme availability; accommodation on site; relatives/friends in area; English-speaking environment.
Abubakar, Shanka and Muuka (2010)	Australia	Various	Quality of course; quality of lecturers; cost of course; safety; library facilities; range of courses; opportunities to mix with other students; recommendations; cost of living; proximity to home.
Padlee, Kamaruddin, and Baharun (2010)	Malaysia	Various	Quality learning environment; use of English language; quality of staff; university reputation; influences from family, friends and media; funding; costs; facilities at institution.
Wilkins and Huisman (2011a)	United Kingdom	Various	Improve employment prospects; experience different culture; improve English; quality of education; reputation of university; quality and content of programme; rankings.

Although the basic push-pull model of international student choice is valuable as an explanatory mechanism, it does have limitations (Li & Bray, 2007). Both push and pull factors are external forces that impact on students' behaviours and choices, but the individual preferences and personal characteristics of students are largely unaccounted for. Individual students might react to different push and pull factors in different ways. Various researchers have built upon the basic push-pull model to develop more sophisticated conceptual models of international student choice. For example, Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño (2006) consider personal reasons, country and city image, institution image and programme evaluation, while Chen's (2007b) model includes student characteristics (e.g. socio-economic background,

personal preferences and academic ability) and the influences of significant others (e.g. family, teachers and employers) in addition to the push and pull factors that act as negative forces from home countries and positive forces to host countries.

This research adopts the push-pull model as its theoretical framework, as the model has been proven effective in categorising students' motivations and decision criteria in a variety of contexts, but the focus is very much on the pull factors that drew students to study at an international branch campus rather than the push factors that influenced UAE nationals to not study at a UAE state institution or international students to leave their home countries. This study, then, provides only a partial test of the push-pull model of international student choice.

The key question, therefore, is to what extent the model predicts student choice if the focus is on choosing international branch campuses, but also we consider the extent to which students' gender and nationality, and their level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate) affect their choices. If there is evidence that personal characteristics influence student behaviour in any consistent manner, then the implication is that marketing professionals in higher education institutions might be able to effectively apply segmentation techniques in their marketing activities and – more generally – use such findings to better understand both their existing and potential customers, thus enabling institutions to better satisfy students' needs and expectations.

### **Research questions**

From a theoretical perspective, this research seeks to discover whether the motivators most frequently mentioned in empirical studies employing the push-pull model of international student destination choice also apply to students at international branch campuses. Thus, the research questions that this study seeks to answer are:

RQ1 What are the motivations of students for choosing to study at an international branch campus (in the UAE)?

RQ2 Do the motivations of students for studying at an international branch campus (in the UAE) differ across groups categorised by (a) gender, (b) nationality, (c) level of study?

RQ3 Do the motivators (pull factors) most often included in the push-pull model of international student destination choice also apply to students who choose to study at international branch campuses (in the UAE)?

### **Method**

As the 'push-pull' model provides the theoretical framework for the study, the existing literature was rigorously examined to discover how international students in general make their destination choices (including the articles listed in Table 1). The findings guided item development, and given the high degree of consensus in the literature, it is believed that content validity has been achieved. The resulting questionnaire consisted of 40 items, which were used for exploratory factor analysis. Examples of items can be seen in Table 3. Each item was randomly placed on the questionnaire to encourage respondents to consider each question individually. All items used a 7-point rating scale where 1 = not true/not important at all, and 7 = essential/extremely important. The questionnaire finished with two open questions, which asked respondents to identify advantages and disadvantages of studying at a branch campus in the UAE (as opposed to studying at universities located in countries such as Australia, the UK and US). The survey questionnaire was completed by respondents using hard copies or an online version.

The study was conducted at international branch campuses in the UAE. The UAE is one of the new higher education hubs, hosting about 40 international branch campuses, and the full service branch campuses there (offering complete degree programmes) differ from the smaller branches scattered around the world that are mainly intended as study abroad facilities for students enrolled at home campuses.

There is one peculiarity that is common to several of the countries that host a number of international branch campuses: their populations consist of high proportions of expatriates and foreign workers. In 2010, nearly 26% of Singapore's population was made up of non-residents (foreigners who were working, studying or living in Singapore but not granted permanent residence) (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2010). Most of the Arab Gulf States have populations with even greater proportions of expatriates. For example, over 80% of the UAE's population consists of expatriates and foreign workers (UAE Interact, 2009).

International branch campuses located in the new higher education hubs tend to enrol large proportions of their students from local expatriate communities. In the UAE, expatriates typically account for at least three-quarters of total enrolments at branch campuses. The remaining students are either UAE nationals or international students from outside the UAE. If expatriates want to undertake higher education in the countries where they completed their high school education and where their families live, or for mature students, where they work, then private providers/branch campuses are often the only option, as most federal/state institutions do not admit many, if any, expatriates.

We believe that it is not incorrect to consider non-UAE national students at branch campuses in the UAE as international students and to use the push-pull model of international student choice. Some official definitions of 'international student' used by national governments do not mention mobility across national borders (Lasanowski, 2009). Residency in the UAE is never permanent for non-UAE nationals and even property owners have to apply for a new residency visa every three years. While a parent can sponsor his/her daughter over the age of 18, the same does not hold true for a son, which means males over the age of 18 must be either in full-time education or full-time employment to gain residency in the UAE (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2010).

In the UK, international students are defined as those students whose normal place of residence is outside the UK, that is to say, they are not UK domiciled (Lasanowski, 2009). This holds true also in the UAE, even though many of the students have lived for significant parts of their lives in the country. At Murdoch University Dubai, about 90% of students consider their domicile to be outside the UAE (Wilkins, 2011). We accept that an Indian living in India who decides to study in the UK is not directly comparable with an Indian expatriate living in the UAE who decides to study in the UAE, but we would argue that this does not invalidate our method.

The questionnaire was distributed by students of a capstone project (a final year subject - in this case Marketing - that has a report on a particular topic embedded in it, which synthesises all knowledge accumulated in previous subjects studied) at an international branch campus in the UAE by posting the survey link on their Facebook accounts and sending personal emails to all of their friends in the UAE who study at an international branch campus. The questionnaires were distributed over a five-week period, generating 320 usable responses. This is sufficient for exploratory factor analysis, as Hensley (1999) found that researchers generally recommend a minimum of 150 observations with item-to-response ratios of at least 1 to 4. Most of the responses came from just six institutions - one Australian, two UK and three North American. Over 90% of the respondents were following a programme in Business, Management or Computer Science/Information Technology, which is not surprising given that most branch campuses in the UAE operate in these fields and 43%



of all students at non-federal institutions in the UAE study these subjects (Aboul-Ela, 2009). Table 2 shows a summary profile of the respondents.

**Table 2.** Summary profile of respondents ( $n = 320$ ).

Categories		Number	%
Gender	Male	163	50.9
	Female	157	49.1
Nationality	Emirati (UAE)	48	15.0
	Indian	103	32.2
	Pakistani	63	19.7
	African	21	6.6
	Other	85	26.5
Level of study	Undergraduate	186	58.1
	Postgraduate	134	41.9

## Results and discussion

Exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components with Varimax rotation was conducted (using SPSS version 16) to determine the underlying components of 40 items that represented possible motivations for choosing to study at an international branch campus. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test produced a value of .952, far higher than the cut-off point of .70, thus indicating that the sample size of 320 was adequate. In addition, the Bartlett test of sphericity ( $p = .000$ ) indicates that the data has a high enough degree of correlation between at least a number of the variables, making it suitable for exploratory factor analysis.

Using criteria such as Eigenvalue  $> 1$  and factor loading  $> .50$ , a preliminary factor analysis was run from which three factors were extracted, which accounted for 69.14% of total variance. The items in each factor were examined so that each factor could be named. It was decided to name the three factors Convenience, Country attractions and Quality/Employment. Upon closer examination it was noticed that each of the items in the Quality/Employment component would not have been out of place in one of the other two components, and given that Quality/Employment accounted for only 3.63% of variance, it was decided to rerun the factor analysis extracting only two factors.

In the final solution, the first component, named 'Convenience', consists of nine items and accounts for 58.9% of variance (Table 3). All of the items in the Convenience component are associated with avoiding financial expense, 'hassle' or effort, or maintaining the status quo in the student's personal and working lives. There has been a trend globally for more higher education students to stay living at home, mainly for economic reasons, but also due to emotional attachment to family and friends (Simões & Soares, 2010). The strength of this factor makes clear that aspects of convenience considerably influence students' choice of destination.

The second component, named 'Country attractions', consists of six items and accounts for a further 9.9% of variance. This component is concerned with specific attractive features associated with living and studying in the UAE. It should be remembered that the vast majority of students had family already living in the UAE before they started their higher education programme. Internal consistency of the factors was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The alpha values were .93 and .90, comfortably above the minimum .70

recommended by Nunnally (1978) and thus indicating that the measures of each factor are reliable.

**Table 3.** Rotated component matrix: student motivations for studying at an international branch campus in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

	Factor 1	Factor 2
<b>Factor 1: Convenience</b>		
My employer paid all or some of my fees	.842	
Avoid the time and hassle of taking flights	.812	
Same programme as in Western country	.779	
Most of my friends chose to study in the UAE	.754	
I can study part-time and continue in my job	.720	
I can have a better social life in the UAE	.719	
No need to find new friends abroad	.697	
I can continue living with family	.653	
Avoid language difficulties	.611	
<b>Factor 2: Country attractions</b>		
UAE is a safer country in which to live		.904
UAE is a pleasant country in which to live/study		.842
Maintain close contact with friends and family		.840
More familiar/comfortable with culture/lifestyle		.729
Interaction with students from diverse cultures		.669
Easier to find job in UAE/Gulf after I graduate		.549
Eigenvalue	8.84	1.48
Variance (%)	58.92	9.86
Cumulative variance (%)	58.92	68.78
Cronbach's Alpha	.93	.90

A one-way between groups multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to investigate differences in motivations between males and females, students of different nationality and students studying at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. On the combined dependent variables of Convenience and Country attractions, there appeared a statistically significant difference for males and females, which was:  $F(2, 236) = 6.43, p = .002$ , Wilks'  $\lambda = .948$ . The result for groups based on nationality was also significant:  $F(8, 466) = 4.19, p = .000$ , Wilks'  $\lambda = .870$ . Finally, on the combined dependent variables of Convenience and Country attractions, the result based on level of study appears non-significant:  $F(2, 236) = .33, p = .967$ , Wilks'  $\lambda = 1.00$ .

In order to better interpret the MANOVA results, univariate ANOVAs were performed as post-hoc analysis. The univariate ANOVAs for nationality confirm significant group differences across nationalities for both Convenience and Country attractions motivations (Table 4). Although the MANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference between males and females, the univariate tests show the result as non-significant. The reason for this is that the multivariate test takes account of the correlation between dependent variables and so it has more power to detect group differences (Field, 2009, p. 610).

**Table 4.** MANOVA test results of between-subjects effects (univariate ANOVAs).

Components			Group means* (SD)		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	
	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>					
Convenience	4.52 (1.71)	4.32 (1.40)			.988	.321	
Country attractions	4.96 (1.68)	5.19 (1.23)			2.408	.122	
	<u>Emirati</u>	<u>Indian</u>	<u>Pakistani</u>	<u>African</u>	<u>Other</u>		
Convenience	4.31 (1.54)	4.38 (1.30)	5.24 (1.61)	3.04 (1.81)	4.35 (1.49)	7.426	.000
Country attractions	4.92 (1.43)	5.13 (0.98)	5.65 (1.28)	3.66 (2.17)	4.93 (1.67)	6.550	.000
	<u>Undergraduate</u>	<u>Postgraduate</u>					
Convenience	4.41 (1.68)	4.44 (1.39)				.014	.905
Country attractions	5.01 (1.57)	5.18 (1.37)				.059	.808

\* Measured on a 7-point rating scale where 1 = not true/not important at all, and 7 = essential/extremely important.

Pakistani students were most motivated by country attractions (mean score = 5.65). Given that the UAE is a Muslim country, religious and cultural factors probably explain why Pakistanis in particular find the UAE a pleasant and comfortable country in which to live and study. There has also been unrest in Pakistan. In addition, most Pakistani families would not be happy allowing their daughters to leave the family home for the purpose of study (and also before their daughters are married). Given that the vast majority of Pakistani students come from expatriate families, this further explains why Pakistanis find it convenient to stay in the UAE for their higher education (mean score = 5.24). In contrast, African students awarded the lowest scores for both Convenience (mean score = 3.04) and Country attractions (mean score = 3.66). It is possible that the motivation of African students to study in the UAE has less to do with the ‘pull’ factors examined in this study and more to do with ‘push’ factors, such as lack of opportunities, quality and higher education capacity in their home countries. As the univariate tests reveal statistically significant differences between students of different nationality, this suggests that institutions could effectively employ market segmentation techniques to target students of different nationality.

We further examined our data from two perspectives: first, we considered the reasons that were most often cited as ‘extremely important’ (point 7 on the 7-point rating scale) in determining students’ decision to study as an international branch campus in the UAE, and second, we looked at the reasons that achieved the highest mean scores. This second perspective was particularly interesting as it identified reasons that were excluded from the factor analysis solution.

The reasons that were most often cited as ‘extremely important’ by students were: ‘UAE is a safer country in which to live’ (31.9% of respondents); ‘Maintain close contact with friends and family’ (31.6%); ‘It is easier to practice my religion in the UAE’ (28.8%); and ‘more familiar/comfortable with culture/lifestyle in UAE’ (27.8%). ‘UAE is a safer country in which to live’ was also the reason that achieved the highest mean score (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Main reasons explaining students' decision to study at an international branch campus in the UAE.

Reason	Mean*	SD	Factor
UAE is a safer country in which to live	5.21	1.74	Country
Maintain close contact with friends and family	5.20	1.75	Country
More familiar/comfortable with culture/lifestyle	5.17	1.72	Country
UAE is a pleasant country in which to live/study	5.02	1.73	Country
Interaction with students from different cultures	5.00	1.68	Country
Same degree as in Western country	4.99	1.83	Convenience
Foreign universities have best reputation in UAE	4.96	1.78	<i>Not included</i>
I can continue living with family	4.94	1.90	Convenience
Course content suitable for work in UAE/Gulf	4.91	1.69	<i>Not included</i>
Entry requirements are lower in UAE	4.91	1.73	<i>Not included</i>
Family advised me/expected me to stay in UAE	4.91	1.90	<i>Not included</i>
Finding food I like is easier in UAE	4.91	1.93	<i>Not included</i>
I can study part-time and continue in my job	4.89	1.85	Convenience
Easier to find job in UAE/Gulf after I graduate	4.86	1.82	Country
Tuition fees are lower in UAE	4.85	1.85	<i>Not included</i>
It is easier to practice my religion in UAE	4.82	1.90	<i>Not included</i>
Factor 1: Convenience	4.42	1.83	-
Factor 2: Country attractions	5.08	1.74	-

\* Measured on a 7-point rating scale where 1 = not true/not important at all, and 7 = essential/extremely important.

The UAE is a relatively safe country, where petty crime is almost non-existent. For students living in countries experiencing conflict, which includes several countries across the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), the UAE might seem like an appealing destination. Among UAE nationals and expatriates already living in the UAE, perceptions of their potential safety in Western countries is probably negative and therefore it reinforces their decision to stay in the UAE. Students already living in the UAE are also motivated to stay in the UAE because they can maintain personal relationships and avoid the culture shock associated with adjustment to life in an alien culture.

The cost of studying at an international branch campus can be significantly less than studying at the home campus of a university based in Australia, the UK or US. For example, tuition fees at the University of Nottingham's Malaysian campus are approximately 60% of the fees it charges in the UK. Previous research has suggested that international branch campuses might compete for international students in the global market by implementing competitive pricing strategies (Becker, 2009; Wilkins, 2010; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011a). Some 11.6% of respondents in this study said that lower tuition fees in the UAE were 'extremely important' in determining their decision to study at an international branch campus in the UAE. However, 19.4% of respondents said that lower tuition fees were 'not important at all' (point 1 on the 7-point rating scale).

In identifying the advantages of studying at an international branch campus (answers to the open questions), over 5% of respondents mentioned the opportunity to mix with students and professors of different nationalities and backgrounds even though on university campuses globally the most typical pattern is one of minimal interaction between students from different cultural backgrounds (Summers & Volet, 2008). It is common in the UAE for UAE

nationals and expatriate citizens from different countries/regions to not mix socially, and so higher education at a branch campus offers a unique and valuable multi-cultural experience.

Several students mentioned that they were following the same programme and achieving the same degree certificate awarded at the home campus, so there was little justification for the extra expense and inconvenience of studying at the home campus. Smith (2010) examined the concept of 'equivalence' between degrees taken at home and transnational campuses (in collaborative provision) and noted the increasing role and importance of national codes of practice and quality assurance systems. She found that codes of practice did not expect programmes at home and abroad to be identical, but rather they allowed flexibility for institutions to adapt to local contexts.

As an advantage for studying at an international branch campus, one respondent simply wrote, 'I didn't want to have to change my whole life for the sake of getting a degree'. In another study examining student choice in the UAE, it was found that many UAE nationals prefer to study at an international branch campus rather than at a UAE federal institution (Wilkins, 2011). Motives for wanting to enrol at an international branch campus included the opportunity to study subjects not offered at federal institutions, the possibility of gaining a more highly respected foreign degree, better employment prospects and the opportunity to study in a multi-cultural environment.

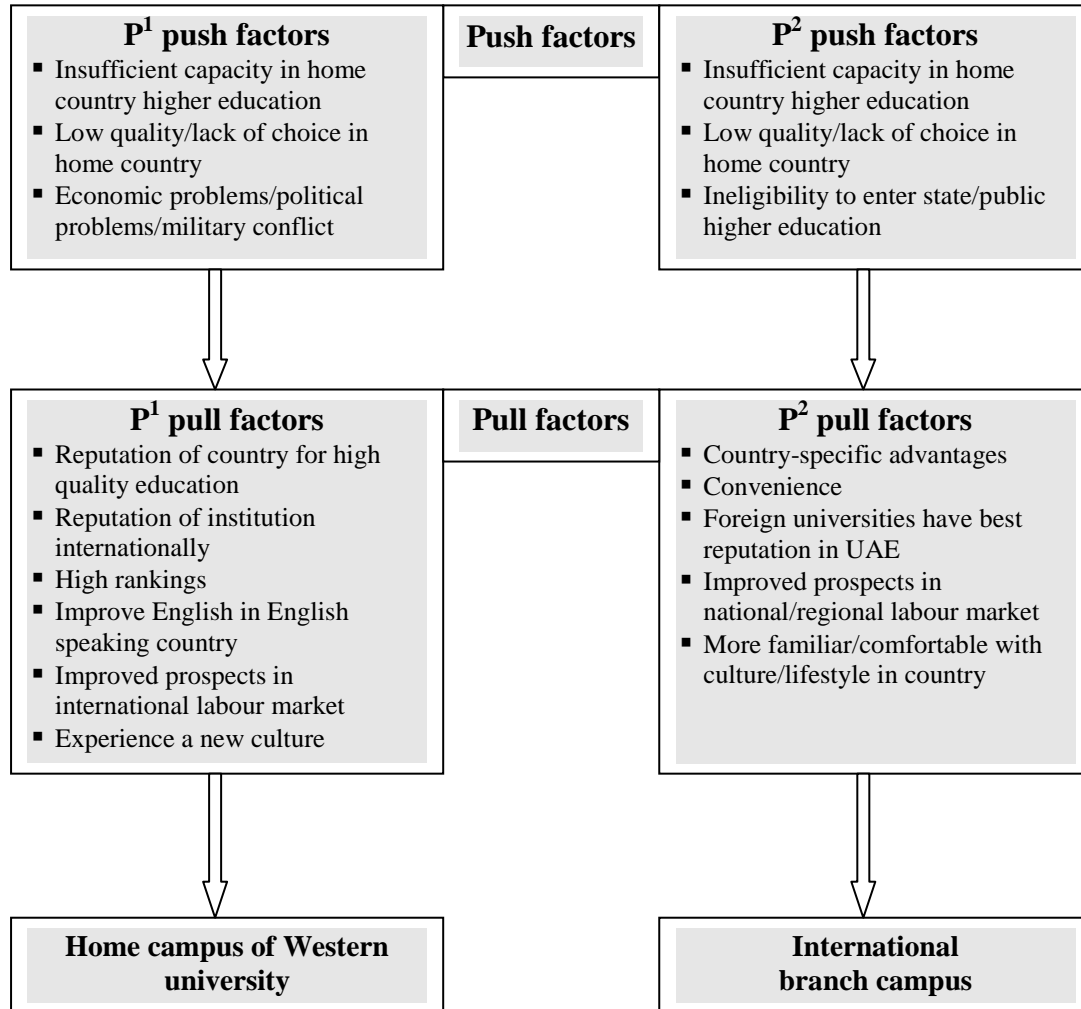
Disadvantages of study at an international branch campus cited by respondents included: 'reputation of the main branch outshines the offshore branch'; 'UAE colleges with the best facilities charge very high fees'; 'there is no campus life in the UAE'; 'some people think the degree is not equal'; 'cultural clashes and difficulty understanding policies and procedures'; 'no independent experience away from family'; and 'it's not like studying in the West, it's not the real thing'. Over half of the respondents did not specify any disadvantages: 42% of the respondents did not write an answer and 9% wrote responses such as 'for me, there are no disadvantages' or 'nothing comes to my mind as a disadvantage'.

Previous research has found that international students who choose to study in Western countries are motivated by things such as quality of education, reputation of country, reputation of institution, quality of professors, university/department rankings, teaching and learning environment, gaining international experience and improving English language skills in an English speaking country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Chen, 2008; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011a). According to the findings of this study, the main motivations of students who choose to study at an international branch campus are different to those of students who choose to study at home campuses. We can conclude, therefore, that many of the motivators found in previous empirical studies that employed the push-pull model of international student destination choice do not apply to students at international branch campuses in the UAE. Thus, we propose a revised model of international student destination choice (our Push<sup>2</sup>-Pull<sup>2</sup> model), which incorporates two distinct sets of push and pull factors - one that applies to the home campuses of Western universities and one that applies to international branch campuses (Figure 1).

## **Conclusion and outlook**

This study found that students at branch campuses have different sets of motivations for their choices of destination than the theoretical model based on push-pull factors predicts, although there is also an overlap in factors. With respect to the push factors, the traditional push-pull model includes economic and political problems, whereas our study did not reveal those factors, although safety was cited as important to students and ineligibility to enrol in state/public higher education 'pushed' students to branch campuses. Pull factors that emerged in our study focus on (perceived) intra-host country quality differences, improved regional labour market prospects and comfortability with culture/lifestyle. Based on the factor

analysis, we revealed two key dimensions underlying the pull factors, namely convenience and country-specific advantages.



**Figure 1.** Push<sup>2</sup>-Pull<sup>2</sup> model of international student destination choice.

At the practical level of universities' marketing and recruitment strategies, the considerable differences in choice patterns of international students looking for a Western education in the home country versus an educational experience at a branch campus point out that Western universities which operate international branch campuses need not (at present) be afraid that their branches cannibalise the demand for places at their home campuses. This may be a reassuring finding in light of the fact that some branch campus initiatives failed and others have not yet fully convincingly proven to be successful and/or sustainable (Becker, 2009; Altbach, 2010).

The other practical insight gained from the study relates to the increasing competition for international students in higher education (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007). A corollary is that there is increasing pressure on institutions to satisfy students. To do this, institutions

must understand students' needs, wants and expectations. Our research found significant differences by gender and nationality. These findings are consistent with previous studies that found differences in the motivations of males and females and/or students in different countries (e.g. Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Shanka, Quintal & Taylor, 2005; Maringe, 2006). This implies the need for continuous market research. Understanding students' choice criteria enables institutions to effectively position themselves in the market, thereby increasing the attractiveness of the institutions to students (Maringe, 2006). In a crowded marketplace, such as the UAE with over 40 branch campuses, institutions must find ways to differentiate themselves from the competition.

In competitive markets, segmentation techniques can often be effective (Szekeres, 2010). Institutions that identify market segments can then target those segments that might best contribute to achieving the organisation's strategic objectives. Then, the product offering can be effectively positioned and an appropriate marketing mix developed – incorporating decisions on product characteristics, pricing, promotion etc. This research found that students of different nationality have different motivations and attitudes, which impact upon their choice of destination. Institutions might therefore consider targeting specific nationalities and catering for their specific demands, thereby satisfying students' needs more precisely. Such a strategy should improve student satisfaction, thus improving student retention and word-of-mouth recommendations, both of which can contribute to the improved financial performance of an institution (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009).

This research is not without limitations. First, the study was conducted in one country that has many international branch campuses, but the findings are not generalisable across all countries that host international branch campuses. Both students and institutions vary across countries. For example, Monash and Nottingham universities in Malaysia are (in 2011) more research-intensive than any of the branch campuses in the UAE. Clearly, further research is required, especially in other countries, to corroborate the findings and conclusions of this study. Second, although the study used the push-pull model of international student destination choice as its theoretical framework, it concentrated on collecting and analysing data on the 'pull' factors. We were primarily interested in the positive reasons why students chose to study at a branch campus in the UAE, rather than why they decided not to study at a federal higher education institution (UAE nationals) or why they chose to leave their home countries (overseas students). Recent research has found that 'push' factors now have considerably less influence over students' decision-making than 'pull' factors (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011a). Third, we must stress that our study is a snap-shot in time. The international higher education market is fast changing and students' demands and expectations can alter quickly. Thus, the motivators in our Push<sup>2</sup>-Pull<sup>2</sup> model are liable to change over time. Key questions are: 'to what extent are foreign higher education institutions able to improve their quality, status and prestige and hence become more attractive?' and 'for how long will students be willing to pay the relatively high fees at some international branch campuses?' For example, in 2011, the tuition (and other mandatory) fees for a four-year undergraduate programme at New York University Abu Dhabi totalled \$165,120 and Middlesex University's three-year programme in Dubai cost \$37,602.

Despite its limitations, this research makes several contributions. It is the first published study to investigate the reasons why students choose to undertake their higher education at an international branch campus. The reasons specified by the highest numbers of students have been identified, and also the reasons with the highest mean scores, providing a valuable insight into student motivations and attitudes for higher education institutions. The findings have enabled us to revise the traditional push-pull model of international student destination choice, and some implications for strategies of higher education institutions have been discussed.



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